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THE DISMISSAL OF GENERAL McCLELLAN:

WHY DID LINCOLN DELAY?

by

William J. Drake
Colonel, USAF

A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

IN

FULFILLMENT OF THE CURRICULUM

REQUIREMENT

Advisor: DR. HOWARD M. HENSEL

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ABSTRACT

TITLE: The Dismissal of General McClellan: Why did Lincoln Delay?

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For nearly fifteen months President Abraham Lincoln tolerated undisguised resistance, incompetence, and clear insubordination from Major General George B. McClellan, commander of the Army of the Potomac and, for a few months, General-in-Chief of all Union armed forces. The President delayed his eventual decision to relieve McClellan from command for several reasons, including a misplaced respect and trust in McClellan's character and professionalism; his inability to find the right time and person for replacement; his nagging fear of both the Confederate potential and a McClellan inspired insurrection of Union forces; his political judgement; the lack of help he received from his senior advisors; and most important, his basic personal character, forever prone to tolerance and forgiveness. Considering the nature of the Civil War, Lincoln's delay probably cost the nation thousands of lives and huge property damage. This reality should serve to diminish historical accounts of Lincoln as a great, perhaps the greatest, war President in United States history. It seems clear, in retrospect, that President Lincoln should have acted quicker and more decisively in relieving General McClellan at the first hint that his senior General did not share and support his vision for conduct of the war.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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INTRODUCTION

After more than 15 months of often strained relations, President Abraham Lincoln finally ordered the replacement of Major General George B. McClellan from command of the Army of the Potomac on November 5, 1862. In the days leading up to that decision, Governor Kirkwood of Iowa had said to the President: "There is an impression abroad out West, Mr. President, that you do not dare to remove General McClellan." Lincoln responded: "I would remove him tomorrow...if convinced it were for the good of the service."¹

Like many of President Lincoln's contemporaries, today's students of Civil War leadership find Lincoln's seemingly endless tolerance of General McClellan's conduct hard to fathom. How could the President, in whose judgement rests the lives and property of so many, allow gross insubordination and incompetence from his senior general officer? Secondly, given Lincoln's tolerant management practices, how can one explain the nearly ubiquitous assessments of Lincoln as a shrewd judge of character and..."a great war president, probably the greatest in our history,...?"²

The purpose of this paper is to assess the reasons why it took President Lincoln so long to relieve General McClellan from command and to determine if Lincoln deserves the praise he gets as a wartime leader. As historians have lavishly documented McClellan's many professional shortcomings, no attempt will be made to reiterate them here except as they are useful in highlighting factors that motivated Lincoln. The assessment will conclude that "good of the service" was just one of several factors, not even the most important, that influenced Lincoln's

¹ Carl Sandburg, ABRAHAM LINCOLN - THE WAR YEARS - I (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1939), Volume III, p. 591.

² T. Harry Williams, LINCOLN AND HIS GENERALS (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1981), p. vii.

decisions to continue trusting General McClellan's leadership in the face of compelling reasons to relieve him much earlier. In addition, it will expose Lincoln's failure to manage for results, disguised by many historians behind a veil of sympathy for this leader who created and nurtured many of his own problems.

LINCOLN'S BASIC CHARACTER & ABILITY

LEADERSHIP STYLE: Lincoln's leadership style played a huge role in his personnel decisions. He could have been the poster boy for what today's Quality Air Force would call a "new (or quality) leader." He was broad minded and visionary; an understanding mentor/coach; one who dared to trust when the urge to dictate was overpowering; a promoter of cooperation, teamwork, and innovation; a good listener with an office door that was not just open, but seemingly off the hinges; and he worried himself sick attempting to adequately resource his subordinates.³ His uncommon honesty, humility, and sincerity in dealing with friend and adversary, alike, made people enjoy working for him and led to the nickname, "Honest Abe." General Ambrose Burnside once said after severely disappointing Lincoln by rejecting his invitation to command: "If there is an honest man on the face of the earth,...Lincoln is one."⁴ In that assessment Burnside was referring to Lincoln's kind, polite, and understanding manner, not just his truthfulness.

Lincoln cared about results and had no ambition for personal credit. On one occasion he said to a group of general officers in a meeting at the White House: "I don't care, gentlemen, what plan you have,...all I ask is for you to just pitch in!"⁵ At another time he said: "I will hold McClellan's

³ Col Richard A. Khaler and Lt Col David Walker, INTRODUCTION TO QUALITY AIR FORCE (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air War College, 1993), Instruction Period 2104, Slide 7.

⁴ William Marvel, BURNSIDE (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 93.

horse if he will only bring us success."⁶ He consistently went out of his way to avoid hurting feelings or discrediting people, believing that individuals are basically good and should not be wasted in the heat of passion.

As a case in point, one evening, as he often did, the President went to McClellan's quarters to discuss issues of the day. Lincoln favored meetings in the casual setting of another person's home or work place and purposely engaged in story telling and a meandering style of conversation to get "the measure"⁷ of people. That night McClellan's servant told Lincoln that the General was at a wedding, so Lincoln decided to wait with the rest of his party in the parlor. After about one hour McClellan returned home and, being told that the President was waiting, walked by the open door to the parlor and went upstairs without saying a word. Half an hour later Lincoln asked the servant to check on McClellan's progress. To everyone's surprise and the indignation of many, the servant returned with the "coolly" worded message that McClellan had retired for the night. John Hay, the President's secretary, observed that Lincoln "seemed not to have noticed" the obvious snub, "saying it was better at this time not to be making points of etiquette & personal dignity."⁸

In addition to a measure of patience and understanding that his wife likened to that of a saint,⁹ Lincoln was also extremely deliberate in making decisions. He would not make changes without deep thought and a clear vision of the future, as he illustrated in this, one of his many anecdotes:

"This situation reminds me of a Union man in Kentucky whose two sons enlisted in the Federal Army. His wife was a Confederate sympathizer. His

⁵ Stephen W. Sears, *GEORGE B. McCLELLAN - THE YOUNG NAPOLEON* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1988), p. 160.

⁶ Sandburg, p. 323.

⁷ Sears, p. 169.

⁸ Tyler Dennett, *LINCOLN AND THE CIVIL WAR IN THE DIARIES AND LETTERS OF JOHN HAY* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1939), p. 34.

⁹ Sandburg, p. 548.

nearest neighbor was a Confederate in feeling and his two sons were fighting under Lee. This neighbor's wife was a Union woman and it nearly broke her heart to know that her sons were arrayed against the Union.

"Finally, the two men...swapped wives, in short.

"But this didn't seem to help matters any, for the sons of the Union woman were still fighting for the South, and the sons of the Confederate woman continued in the Federal Army; the Union husband couldn't get along with his Union wife, and the Confederate husband and his Confederate wife couldn't agree upon anything, being forever fussing and quarreling.

"It's the same thing with the Army. It doesn't seem worth while to secure divorces and then marry the Army and McClellan to others, for they won't get along any better than they do now, and there'll only be a new set of heartaches started.

"I think we'd better wait; perhaps a real fighting general will come along some of these days, and then we'll all be happy. If you go to mixing in a mix-up, you only make the muddle worse."¹⁰

In summary, throughout his relationship with McClellan President Lincoln recognized in the general a man of ideas and opinion from whom he could learn, if not always agree. The President was patient to a fault, avoiding direct orders to the military at almost any cost. For instance, in correspondence to McClellan that questioned courses of action or expressed opinions differing from those of the General, Lincoln would invariably end with a phrase like: "I do not intend this to be an order in any sense, but...to show you the grounds of my anxiety."¹¹

These methods in a leader would be acceptable if they achieved results, but they did not in McClellan's case. Expecting the unbridled potential in every person to rise to the surface and join ranks for the common good, President Lincoln found in General McClellan the weak link in his leadership theory. To McClellan, Lincoln's tolerance indicated a lack of resolve and purpose; the President's efforts to relate with his senior general officer served only to breed contempt. Thus, it

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 548-49.

¹¹ John G. Nicolay and John Hay, COMPLETE WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN, Volume VII (Lincoln Memorial University, 1894), p. 73-4.

is clear that Lincoln's basic character as a leader was a major factor in delaying the decision to relieve General McClellan.

TECHNICAL ABILITY: Another factor closely related to the issue of basic character was Lincoln's lack of confidence in his own abilities as a military strategist coupled with the politician in him that wanted to avoid embarrassment and blame. His basic instinct told him that in a democracy one has to be offensive, show progress, and bring a war to a speedy conclusion.¹² To that end he knew that early victories on the battlefield, any battlefield, were more important than taking and holding Confederate property. Thus, to Lincoln it made no sense to get fancy trying to envelop Richmond and, at the same time, jeopardize Washington D.C. when a perfectly acceptable Confederate force was waiting to do battle at Manassas.¹³ Consider the down side he would have seen to risking the Capital, which had been sacked once before in recent memory by the British during the War of 1812. Aside from the mess of burned out buildings and chaos in government, such a calamity would have a disproportionate impact on confidence in the Union, both at home and abroad. Thus to Lincoln, the Army of the Potomac had to be both "the sword and the shield of the Union"¹⁴ in a sense that McClellan seemed not to understand. However, when McClellan presented his plan for a surprise attack on Richmond, the President allowed himself to be persuaded that his instinct was wrong, admitting "that he was not a military man and that he would, therefore, accept the opinion of the majority." To his Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, he subsequently said in an unfortunate example of morale cowardice that "we can do nothing else than accept their plan and discard all others....We can't reject it and adopt another

¹² Howard M. Hensel, Lectures to the Civil War Advanced Studies Class: Session A (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air War College, 23 and 28 Mar 1994).

¹³ Roy P. Basler, THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), p. 118-19.

¹⁴ Hensel, 23 Mar 1994 lecture.

without assuming all the responsibility in the case of the failure of the one we adopt."¹⁵

So, Lincoln opted for decision by committee rather than to trust his own instincts. In so doing he made McClellan demonstrate incompetence beyond a shadow of a doubt before he would dare take action against the General. Uneasy with his relative ignorance and incompetence, the President borrowed and studied numerous books on military strategy from the Library of Congress and made "no fewer than eleven" visits (a total of 42 days in the field)¹⁶ to the Army of the Potomac in an attempt to teach himself the art of war - much the way he had taught himself the law, years before.

To that end Lincoln was successful. Evidence of his considerable growth as a military strategist over the course of the war is provided in his lengthy lecture and questioning of McClellan by telegram on October 13, 1862.¹⁷ Though a dozen months too late, in it he provided McClellan a remarkably clear and thorough critique of his options, weakened only by the ending phrase: "This letter is in no sense an order." However, until he had achieved that level of competence, President Lincoln did not dare risk the employment of his military without General McClellan's opinion and leadership. That fear explains some of the delay in relieving the General from command, but so does Lincoln's basic admiration for McClellan.

LINCOLN LIKED McCLELLAN

First impressions are a powerful part of any relationship. Lincoln could not help being favorably impressed with what he saw in George McClellan from the very beginning, and some of

¹⁵ T. Harry Williams, p. 67.

¹⁶ James M. McPherson, ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE SECOND AMERICAN REVOLUTION (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 66.

¹⁷ Basler, p. 460-461.

those feelings remained throughout their relationship in various forms of compassion, respect, fear, and political affinity.

Lincoln genuinely liked, even admired George McClellan for several reasons. McClellan arrived in Washington on July 26, 1861 and immediately set about the monumental task of molding discipline and pride into an army that had just suffered a demoralizing loss at the first Battle of Bull Run. He looked and acted like the super hero that the public was hungering for, a "Young Napoleon"¹⁸ according to members of the press who were covering his progress. He worked tirelessly, sometimes spending 12 hours of a day on his horse securing the Capital, seeing to the needs of his men, and always being seen by them.¹⁹ That was the kind of selfless dedication that Lincoln could respect and admire in any man.

He also respected (and later came to fear) the profound dedication McClellan's troops had for their commanding general. After a ceremony one afternoon in the early Fall of 1861, Lincoln accompanied McClellan on a horseback ride around the army's lines. Observers indicate that McClellan impressed everyone as being "modest, but obviously self reliant" and showing "abiding faith in himself and his army."²⁰ Everywhere they rode Lincoln studied the spontaneous cheer from the troops when "Little Mac," as they lovingly called him in private, came into view. "...his acknowledgement soon became his trademark: snatching off his cap, he would raise it high above his head and give it a jaunty twirl" to the approving cheers of his troops.²¹ Any politician would be both envious and wary of such a presence, no matter the constituency.

¹⁸ T. Harry Williams, p. 26.
Sandburg, p. 316.

¹⁹ Sears, p. 97.

²⁰ Sandburg, p. 319.

²¹ Sears, p. 97.

Though registered with rival political parties (McClellan was a Democrat), Lincoln and McClellan also shared political views on some important issues of the day. Contrary to the position of the so-called "radical" members of Lincoln's Republican Party, Lincoln, at first, was convinced that a majority of Southerners did not support secession and, if treated properly, held the potential of being strong allies in his fight to preserve the Union. To that end he shared McClellan's philosophy that "the North must avoid harshness and give the South as little offense as possible" and then only against the military, not the civilian populace. That approach, he thought, would preserve the possibility of a friendly reunion without painful memories of embarrassment or punishment promoted or inflicted by the North.²² During the early months of their relationship this philosophy provided what little support Lincoln could muster for McClellan's focus on geographic centers of gravity and his penchant for turning movements and methodical siegecraft to achieve objectives with minimum loss of life.

Both men also felt, at least at first, that the primary national objective of the war was to preserve the Union, not to emancipate slaves. This shared vision made it more difficult for Lincoln to identify a replacement for McClellan from the small group of eligibles, because that view was by no means universally held by senior Union officers. Case in point: Major General Fremont, commander of the Western Department and famous for his exploration and mapping of vast areas of the American West, ordered controversial and politically explosive martial law measures that included freeing slaves in captured enemy territory. Pressure mounted, and Lincoln was forced to relieve Fremont on 24 October 1861. Similarly, on May 19, 1862 Lincoln had to revoke an order given by Major General Hunter that had liberated slaves in Union held areas of

²² Howard M. Hensel, *THE SWORD OF THE UNION* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1989), p. 28.

coastal South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida and formed new Union military units with the resultant freemen. The President was just as exasperated when Major General Butler seized New Orleans and began a similar recruiting of Negroes for the Union military effort.²³ Though Lincoln later modified his position on emancipation when the time was politically correct, he waited to do it for the better part of a year after Fremont's dismissal. During that time the rival Democrats and moderate members of his own party were loudly supporting General McClellan, making it easier to tolerate the General's many faults.

Lincoln and McClellan also shared similar views when it came to the issue of integrating freed slaves into white society; neither man saw a future for free Negroes in American society. Lincoln had "long concluded that some system of gradual emancipation at national expense, coupled with an effort to colonize the freed people abroad" provided the greatest promise of solving the slave issue. He suggested that there was "a moral fitness in returning to Africa her children whose ancestors have been torn away from her by the ruthless hand of fraud and violence."²⁴ When the Africa option did not pan out he suggested that the slaves, when eventually freed, would be better off in a colony of their own in the Republic of New Granada.²⁵ In an August 14, 1862 meeting with a group of Negro freemen at the White House, Lincoln explained his position:

"You and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races....this physical difference is a great disadvantage to us both, as I think. Your race suffers very greatly, many of them, by living among us, while ours suffers from your presence. In a word, we suffer on each side.

"....even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race....The aspiration of men is to enjoy equality with the best when free, but on this broad continent not a single man

²³ Ibid., p. 30-37.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁵ Gideon Welles, *DIARY OF GIDEON WELLES* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), Volume I, p. 123.

of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours....Go where you are treated the best....

"It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated."²⁶

Though that group of Negroes showed no enthusiasm for President Lincoln's colonization initiative, this issue further illustrates that Lincoln and McClellan shared some political views that could work toward perpetuating their otherwise strained relationship.

LITTLE HELP FROM HIS STAFF

Shortly after the liberation of Kuwait with Operation DESERT STORM, General H.T. Johnson, Commander in Chief, US Transportation Command, was asked by a news reporter how he had been able to accomplish the monumental undertaking of positioning allied forces halfway around the world in just weeks. His response: "You get good people and you get out of their way."²⁷

If President Lincoln had limited his failures in getting "good" people for his administrative team to General McClellan, he probably could have been more decisive and timely in personnel matters. Intoxicated with a confidence that his intellect and style of leadership could overcome any personality problems, Lincoln knowingly selected senior leaders and teams that were at each others' throats and nearly dysfunctional to guide the nation through its most perilous journey. That forced Lincoln to ponder the advise coming from his Cabinet more than one would normally expect necessary of a president in order to separate the sound recommendations from all-to-frequent, self-serving intrigues.

²⁶ Sandburg, p. 574-76.

²⁷ Author's recollection of newspaper article reprint (Pentagon, Washington, D.C.: THE EARLY BIRD, date unknown).

Though not unprecedented in Lincoln's time, or now, for a president to appoint people of varying political thought to positions in the Cabinet, Lincoln took the practice to a new and dangerous level. A compromise candidate of his party, he selected for membership in his Cabinet many of the men who had lost the nomination to him at the 1860 Republican Party Convention in Chicago. Compared to Lincoln's two or three years of prominence, most of these men had decades of political experience and affiliations at the national level. Each appointee felt his own personal experience, intellect, and capacity to lead was at least the equal of the new President, and that caused additional strain at a time when Lincoln's plate of problems was already overflowing.²⁸

For instance, William Henry Seward (Secretary of State) and Salmon Portland Chase (Secretary of the Treasury) were bitter rivals, literally hating each other. Each had been strong contenders for presidential nomination, receiving more first round votes than Lincoln, and each maintained his constituencies and presidential aspirations throughout his time in the Lincoln administration. Seward was prominent in the group of Lincoln's advisors who maintained that the North should avoid provocative acts against the South and try to reconcile regional differences through compromise.

Like Chase, Montgomery Blair (Postmaster General), and Gideon Welles (Secretary of the Navy), were united in their hatred for Seward, who they knew had lobbied hard to keep them from becoming selected for the Cabinet.²⁹ Blair was a vocal leader of the group of Lincoln advisors who recommended an immediate, resolute show of force by the North against the South, thinking such a stance would best foster Union support throughout the South. Add to these personality clashes the fact that Seward, Edward Bates (Attorney General) of Missouri, and Caleb

²⁸ Burton J. Hendrick, *LINCOLN'S WAR CABINET* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1946), p. 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

Smith (Secretary of Interior) of Indiana came from "the old Whig element of the Republican Party" while Welles and Blair were "old-line Democrats" (tolerant of slavery). Chase was one of the so-called "radical" Republicans; "if not technically an abolitionist, [he] was...an extreme antislavery man...." By contrast, Lincoln chose Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania, perhaps the least promising and most corrupt man in Congress, to be his Secretary of War at a time when war was staring him in the face. Like Blair and Welles, Cameron was also a prominent Democrat.³⁰

The interesting thing is that in making these selections Lincoln knew full well who he was getting to advise him and administer the government through the tough times ahead. There is a story that Lincoln said to some friends: "I am in a quandary....Pennsylvania is entitled to a cabinet office. But whom shall I appoint?" The friends shouted back in unison: "Not Cameron! He [is] a tricky and corrupt politician." Lincoln responded: "I know, I know..., but can I get along if that state should oppose my administration?"³¹

As it turned out, Cameron had to be relieved from office before Christmas of 1861. Showing no sign that he had learned his lesson after 11 months of administrative turmoil and incompetence, Lincoln chose as Cameron's successor Edwin M. Stanton, also a prominent and influential member of the opposition Democratic Party and a man who had, to that date, worked to discredit and obstruct Lincoln's administration.³²

The challenges that these contrasting personalities created for Lincoln was summed up in the diary of Edward Bates as follows: "the administration...was not a unit; it was departmentalized, each Secretary keeping monastic-like in his own office, knowing little of what was going on in the others, not participating in the general concerns of the nation."³³

³⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

³¹ Ibid., p. 106.

³² Welles, p. 57.

Lincoln's penchant for appointing Democrats and incompetents to important positions in the Administration and commands in the military also enraged his power base, the left wing of his Republican party. It was reported to Congress that at one time in 1861, 80 of the 110 general officers in the Army were Democrats.³⁴ In addition, general officer appointments were, in many cases, made for political or sympathetic reasons, the qualification for many recipients being little more than their prominent place in society. For instance, Lincoln wrote Stanton on March 18, 1862: "...I do not wish Gen. Wool's feelings hurt, and I am ready to make him a Major Genl. if it will do any good."³⁵

Given these factors it is no wonder that McClellan's first months in Washington were spent in Lincoln's good graces. When McClellan pleaded to the President: "Don't let them hurry me....", Lincoln responded respectfully: "You shall have your own way in the matter, I assure you."³⁶ But in private Lincoln was becoming uneasy with McClellan. When Major General Hunter complained to the President on December 31, 1861 of being slighted in his assignment relative to other, less senior general officers, Lincoln's response had deeper meaning: "He who does *something* at the head of one Regiment, will eclipse him who does *nothing* at the head of a hundred."³⁷

LINCOLN TAKES CHARGE

General McClellan observed: "The difficulties of my position in Washington commenced when I was first confined to my bed with typhoid fever in December and January (1861-1862) for some

³³ Hendrick. p. 191.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 282.

³⁵ Basler, p. 164.

³⁶ Dennett, p. 27.

³⁷ Basler, p. 84-5.

three weeks, and culminated soon after Mr. Stanton became Secretary of War."³⁸ That seems to be an accurate assessment. With the prospect that McClellan could die from his illness and with troubles mounting all around him, including the sudden death of his favorite son, Lincoln asked Brigadier General Montgomery Meigs, Quartermaster General, in obvious despair: "General, what shall I do? The people are impatient; Chase has no money, and he tells me he can raise no more; the General of the Army has typhoid fever. The bottom is out of the tub. What shall I do?"³⁹ Following that brief weakness, Lincoln issued his first direct orders to counter the lethargy he saw in the Army of the Potomac. In a conversation with Senator Browning, Lincoln explained that "he had taken the measure of General McClellan as best he could and was satisfied that 'he had the capacity to make arrangements properly for a great conflict....' As the moment for action approached... he became nervous and oppressed with the responsibility and hesitated to meet the crisis." Lincoln continued, explaining that McClellan now understood what was expected of him, "and he must do it."⁴⁰ Demonstrating a minimum measure of presidential courage, Lincoln issued President's War Order #3 relieving McClellan as General-in-Chief on March 11th. It would have been a more dignified action had the President explained the order to McClellan or, at least, made sure McClellan did not find out first from friends or the newspaper.⁴¹ The President told his Cabinet that he was pained to have to relieve the General, but that he "thought he was doing Gen. McC. a very great kindness in permitting him to retain command of the Army of the Potomac, and giving him an opportunity to retrieve his errors."⁴² Again, the compassion in Lincoln's basic

³⁸ George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story* (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1887), p. 155.

³⁹ Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington* (New York: Garden City Publishing Company, Inc., 1945), p. 125.

⁴⁰ Sears, p. 169.

⁴¹ T. Harry Williams, p. 71.
McClellan, p. 224.

character was a primary reason McClellan's military career survived. Another was fear. Though heavy pressure for a change of generals continued to come from Congress and the Cabinet and he was faced with an ever widening war that threatened great loss of life and property on both sides, the President did not want to act before McClellan had either totally discredited himself or a better general had surfaced.

Considering the growing potential of additional victories by the Confederacy, including Lincoln's constant nightmare, a raid on the Capital and the galvanizing affect it would have on Southern resolve and support for the Confederacy abroad, he feared most the loss of time a change in Commander of the Army of the Potomac would cause. After all, he had invested nearly eight months of patience in McClellan and had consciously chosen a national military strategy that incorporated "Little Mac's" campaign plan on the ground over the slow strangle strategy, referred to as "Scott's Anaconda," promoted by his former general-in-chief, Winfield Scott.⁴³ Thus, Lincoln convinced himself that the future could only be better given the potential costs of changing course in mid stream.

THE DECISION IS MADE

Sometime during the following four months, suffering unmercifully from the self-inflicted wound of having approved McClellan's peninsula plan, President Lincoln decided that there was no salvation for the General. Lincoln had never believed that McClellan's plan was superior to a decisive engagement of the rebels at Manassas. The Manassas alternative would have protected Washington (his highest priority) as well as possibly destroy the enemy in the field. He did not

⁴² Dennett, p. 37.

⁴³ John G. Nicolay, A SHORT LIFE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN (New York: The Century Company, 1923), p. 232.

see an alternative in either option to the blood letting that McClellan was trying to avoid. By giving in to McClellan's persuasion he had failed to make the general understand that fancy maneuver, slow attrition, and seizing enemy property was not the route to success. He knew that he had no one to blame but himself for approving not only the plan but the most senior position of leadership for a general afflicted with what he termed "the slows."⁴⁴ Add to that continued, strong pressure for action from many directions and McClellan's insubordination at every turn and Lincoln knew what he had to do. Timing was the only variable.

On June 24, 1862 the President visited retired Brevet Lieutenant General Winfield Scott at West Point to seek advice from a military mind he very much respected. Scott's record of the meeting indicates that he and the President spoke about force positioning and strategy. Whether or not Scott also offered recommendations regarding proper assignments for senior military leaders, in the next few days Lincoln made several important organizational and personnel decisions, including the assignment of Major General Henry Halleck, a world renowned expert in the art of military operations, as his new General-in-Chief.

To make up for his earlier errors the President also took immediate steps to initiate two key organizational changes. First, on June 26, 1862 he ordered formation of the Army of Virginia under Major General John Pope with the mission of protecting the Capital and engaging the enemy from the North. That act by Lincoln was no doubt an important factor in prompting a jealous McClellan, constantly pleading for reinforcements, to write angrily to the Secretary of War: "...the Government has not sustained this army....If I save this army now, I tell you plainly that I owe no thanks to you or to any other persons in Washington. You have done your best to sacrifice this army." Luckily for McClellan, Stanton and the President never saw these outrageous

⁴⁴ Welles, p. 105.

accusations.⁴⁵

Second, on approximately July 28th Lincoln asked Major General Ambrose Burnside, a public hero as a result of his successes in North Carolina, to accept command of the Army of the Potomac.⁴⁶ Lincoln knew that replacing McClellan rather than dissolving the Army of the Potomac was risky because he remembered the affection and dedication the troops of that army had shown for their commander. However, it was the only way he could preserve the Union positions held near Richmond that had been won at the expense of thousands of casualties. One army could then push from the North and the other from the South to decisively crush the Rebels in the middle.

The first part of his plan was on track; Pope was forming the Army of Virginia while Lincoln deflected requests from McClellan for reinforcements. However, Burnside would not agree to replace McClellan.⁴⁷ Burnside argued with Lincoln that McClellan was the best general officer available, but the President knew that the status quo for the Army of the Potomac was not an acceptable option. With Burnside's refusal, Lincoln decided to go with a second, more risky option: assign forces on the Peninsula to Pope's army and make the decisive attack entirely from the North. That would be consistent with General Halleck's learned advice against perpetuating the alignment of forces in a way that gave the South "interior lines," a gross violation of Jomini's principles of war. Though it meant giving up hard fought ground near Richmond, it would also allow the Army of the Potomac to be systematically and quietly dismantled, preparing McClellan for retirement without risking a morale problem with McClellan's troops. On the other hand, it

⁴⁵ Basler, p. 290.

⁴⁶ Marvel, p. 99.

⁴⁷ McClellan, p. 458.

freed the rebels at Richmond to concentrate on Washington, perhaps before the Army of Virginia would be combat ready.

Burnside received the order to withdraw his forces from the Peninsula on August first and the movement was almost complete on the third. McClellan, who had undoubtedly been told by his old friend, Burnside, about the plot to replace him,⁴⁸ received his order to withdraw on August third.

McClellan protested the withdrawal order to no avail, citing the demoralizing effect it would have on his army, the depression it would breed in the people of the North (and the opposite bolstering of moral in the South), and the doubts such an action would leave in foreign minds.⁴⁹ For obvious reasons, including the daunting job of safely withdrawing tens of thousands of men in the face of the enemy, McClellan was not motivated to move quickly in support of Pope, a man he despised. Thus, he did not personally arrive back in Alexandria, Virginia until August 24th. In the words of John Nicolay, the President's secretary: "...fully eleven days of inestimable time were unnecessarily lost, and the army of Pope was thereby put in serious peril."⁵⁰

NO ALTERNATIVE

The only emotion greater than anger that Lincoln felt after the second battle of Bull Run on August 30, 1862 was fear. With the evidence before him, Lincoln said "it really seemed to him that McC. wanted Pope defeated" and referred to McClellan's "dreadful cowardice" and "incomprehensible interference." Lincoln's secretary said "the President seemed to think him [McClellan] a little crazy."⁵¹ In the President's words: "Where there is such rottenness is there not

⁴⁸ McClellan, p. 458.

⁴⁹ Hensel, p. 85.

⁵⁰ Nicolay, p. 310.

⁵¹ Dennett, p. 45.

reason to fear for the country?"⁵² However, Lincoln did not have time to worry about the past. He saw his army falling back on the Capital in disarray, leaving the city defenseless against the rebel force that had defeated them. He had fielded his best hope for a fighting general and had lost. Now, total defeat at the hands of the Confederacy was staring him right in the eye. Ships and trains were actually being prepared to relocate the seat of national government.

To make matters worse, Lincoln's General-in-Chief, Henry Halleck had deteriorated to "a hopeless condition of mind, semi-paralyzed."⁵³ Lincoln could clearly not consider Halleck a candidate to rescue the situation because, as he confided to his Cabinet, Halleck "shirked responsibility in his present position...in short, is a moral coward, worth but little...."⁵⁴

Given this tolerance of incompetence, one gets a candid glimpse of how hard it was to invite dismissal from positions of senior leadership within the Lincoln administration as well as the calibre of military officer available to Lincoln. As an example, Halleck once complained to the President from his post in the West:

"Another grave difficulty is the want of proper general officers to command the troops and enforce order and discipline....Some of the brigadier-generals assigned to this department are entirely ignorant of their duties and unfit for any command. I assure you, Mr. President, it is very difficult to accomplish much with such means. I am in the condition of a carpenter who is required to build a bridge with a dull ax, a broken saw, and rotten timber."⁵⁵

However, not everyone would agree that Lincoln had no alternatives to McClellan. Gideon Welles was critical, in general, of the engineer mind (siege mentality) of West Point graduates but said on the subject of availability: "We have officers of capacity, depend upon it, and they should

⁵² Welles, 117.

⁵³ McClellan, p. 539.

⁵⁴ Welles, p. 180.

⁵⁵ John G. Nicolay and John Hay, COMPLETE WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN, Volume VII (Lincoln Memorial University, 1894), p. 77.

be hunted out and brought forward. The Secretary [of War] should dig up these jewels. That is his duty."⁵⁶

Nevertheless, early in the morning of September 2, 1862, with nothing but bad news rolling in and preparations under way to abandon Washington, Lincoln swallowed his pride yet again and went to McClellan's house for help. The President asked McClellan if he would, as a favor, resume command of the defenses of Washington and do what he could to save the city. McClellan assured the President that he could save the city. He set about the job immediately, working around the clock in a fashion similar to his first days in Washington, thirteen months before.⁵⁷

Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, described the scene in that day's Cabinet meeting: "There was a more disturbed and desponding feeling than I have ever witnessed in council; the President was greatly distressed." Stanton was absolutely livid upon hearing that McClellan was back in command, but the President explained his decision and assured everyone that he "would be responsible for what he had done to the country."⁵⁸

Lincoln's rationale for the decision was that McClellan knew the ground around Washington better than anyone else and his specialty, as an engineer, was defense. Though troubled by "the slows" and no good in the offense, he had the confidence of the army and there was no better organizer available. Lincoln explained that they had to use the tools available to them: "if he can't fight himself, he excels in making others ready to fight."⁵⁹ He gave everyone in the Cabinet the impression that McClellan's assignment was only temporary and that he would not be given

⁵⁶ Welles, p. 125.

⁵⁷ McClellan, p. 535.

⁵⁸ Welles, p. 104-5.

⁵⁹ Dennett, p. 47.

command of another field army.⁶⁰ Another glimpse of the President's failing moral courage is given in the fact that the order putting McClellan in "command of the fortifications of Washington and of all the troops for the defence of the capital"⁶¹ was originally written as an order of the President, by command of the Secretary of War. "Apparently both Lincoln and Stanton had second thoughts about being held responsible for the decision, and presently the order was revised to remove mention of the president and to substitute Halleck's name for Stanton's."⁶² In fact, all that order did was reaffirm McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac, since he had never been relieved from that post.

The Rebels made Lincoln eat his promise of temporary duty for McClellan within the week. On September 5th there were reports of Confederates crossing into Maryland about 40 miles up the Potomac from Washington. The President asked General Burnside to command a new field army that he had just ordered formed; but again Burnside refused command, declaring "himself unequal to the position."⁶³ General Pope could not help, Lincoln thought, for two reasons: he had lied about his situation during Second Bull Run and, second, "there was here an army prejudice against him, and it was necessary he should leave."⁶⁴ That left only McClellan, and Lincoln swallowed hard again. Distancing himself from the decision, Lincoln made sure everyone knew "that Halleck had turned to McClellan and advised that he should command the troops against the Maryland invasion."⁶⁵ No order was ever written dispatching McClellan, and it is interesting to note that Halleck claimed the President actually made the decision. That seems more plausible,

⁶⁰ Sears, p. 260.

⁶¹ McClellan, p. 536.

⁶² Sears, p. 260.

⁶³ Welles, p. 124.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 116.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

given the infirmities Lincoln diagnosed in Halleck. Obviously forgetting that the boss is always responsible, the President explained that he could not have made the decision "for I can never feel confident that he [McClellan] will do anything effectual."⁶⁶ Thus, McClellan's military career was resurrected from the dead, and Lincoln had to plot another course to relieve the General from command.

No matter who gave the direction, we can assume Lincoln agreed with McClellan's movement for two reasons. First, the President made no effort to prevent it. Second, the President noted, with some pleasure, the growing scandal regarding McClellan's part in Pope's defeat at Second Bull Run: "I am of the opinion that this public feeling against him will make it expedient to take important command from him."⁶⁷ Thus, the new plot. Lincoln had recognized that, in the few short days since McClellan had restored order to the Army of the Potomac, the General had again cultivated greater influence with the army than the President possessed. Under the circumstances Lincoln felt it was smart to leave McClellan in place and not run the risk of a revolt. The troops knew that if they had to fight and die, "Little Mac" cared more about their safety than any other Union general officer. He would not waste their lives.

The Secretary of the Navy summed up the frustration of that moment as follows:

"I would not have given him [McClellan] the command, nor have advised it, strong as he is with the army, had I been consulted; and I feel sad that he has been so intrusted. It may, however, be for the best. There are difficulties in the matter that can scarcely be appreciated by those who do not know all the circumstances. The army is, I fear, much demoralized, and its demoralization is much of it to be attributed to the officers whose highest duty it is to prevent it. To have placed any other general than McClellan, or one of his circle, in command would be to risk disaster. It is painful to entertain the idea that the country is in the hands of such men."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Dennett, p. 47.

⁶⁸ Welles, p. 115.

A MATTER OF TIMING

Despite McClellan's "victory" at Antietam, Lincoln never for a minute lost his desire to relieve the general, because the General never for a minute recovered from "the slows." Had it been otherwise, Lincoln's basic character would probably have driven him to dismiss McClellan's past sins in his usual spirit of redemption, focusing on the future and trusting that the long sought awakening of the General had finally arrived. More important for the President at that time, he could thank McClellan for having finally given him the opportunity to publish his Emancipation Proclamation, discussed in concept with his Cabinet as early as mid-July 1862 and still waiting for some battlefield success to provide the opportunity to go public. That, in turn, would allow the President to at least partially satisfy the Radical Republicans, who he perceived would rather cut off funding for the war than continue without that change to the national war objectives.⁶⁹ Though not an acquittal for McClellan, Antietam did give the General a temporary reprieve.

Lincoln noted on September 25, 1862 that McClellan "was doing nothing to make himself either respected or feared."⁷⁰ However, Lincoln's fear for McClellan's popularity with the troops was still sufficient in late September to prompt a loaded question to his friend, Ozias M. Hatch, early one morning on a hilltop overlooking the huge encampment of the army at the Antietam battlefield: "Hatch - Hatch, what is all this?" Lincoln said referring to the rows of tents in front of them. Hatch, unaware of the President's meaning, responded to the loaded question: "Why, Mr. Lincoln,...this is the Army of the Potomac." Lincoln then made his point, correcting Hatch: "No, Hatch, no. This is General McClellan's bodyguard."⁷¹

⁶⁹ Hensel, p. 111.

⁷⁰ Dennett, p. 51.

⁷¹ Sandburg, p. 595.

That comment was probably born of several very troubling incidents and rumors in the preceding weeks, each adding fuel to the suggestion that there was a conspiracy brewing in the military to thwart the President's objectives. First, General Pope had apparently been betrayed at Second Bull Run. Later, Salmon Chase told Gideon Welles that the commander of the Minnesota regiment at Fort Monroe, General Bankhead, had said "it is time the politicians were cleared out of Washington and the army [put] in power."⁷² If Chase confided in Welles, we can be sure he also told the President.

On another occasion Senator Wilson came to Welles to report that there was "a conspiracy on foot among certain generals for a revolution and the establishment of a provisional national government."⁷³ One of those generals causing concern was probably Brigadier General Fitz John Porter, a close friend of McClellan, who had on several occasions carelessly uttered such treasonous comments in remarkably open conversation.⁷⁴ Apparently "Lincoln agreed with Welles as to how this rumor began traveling, Welles saying: 'Wilson is doubtless sincere, but...is influenced by Stanton, who is mad with the army and officers who stand by McClellan.'"⁷⁵ Nevertheless, it was more fuel and undoubtedly influenced Lincoln's decision to take the uncharacteristically harsh action of dismissing Major John J. Key from active duty in the U.S. Army on September 27, 1862 for conduct unbecoming a "gentleman holding a military commission from the United States." Asked why the rebel army had not been pursued and "bagged immediately after the battle" of Antietam, Major Key responded: "That is not the game" "The object is that neither army shall get much advantage of the other; that both shall be kept in

⁷² Welles, p. 131.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 118.

⁷⁴ Hensel, 28 Mar 1994 Lecture.

⁷⁵ Sandburg, p. 537.

the field till they are exhausted, when we will make a compromise and save slavery."⁷⁶

By the middle of October Lincoln knew that public and military temperament was finally about right to allow McClellan's dismissal, but one obstacle still stood in the way. In a discussion on October 13th with his Vice President, Lincoln said "...he would be compelled to dismiss General McClellan....He had grown weary of the general's endless excuses, he said, and were it not for the midterm elections taking place just then he would dismiss him. He had concluded that for the moment keeping him in command was the more politic thing to do."⁷⁷ However, the Lincoln Administration "was under attack from several political elements and many of its supporters feared an autumn electoral defeat" for the following reasons: the Peninsula and Mississippi River initiatives had failed; prices and taxes were rising; people hated the draft, arbitrary arrests, and other invasions of basic civil liberties; and , worst of all, there was widespread concern over the anticipated influx of liberated slaves, who would take jobs from whites, drive labor rates down, and stimulate violence.⁷⁸ Letters such as the one from a friend in Illinois to the President's personal secretary, John Nicolay, may have made Lincoln doubt that decision: "You cannot imagine the earnestness of denunciation which fills the West in regard to McClellan. *I have not heard one single man defend him*....His continuance in command in the East begins to shake the confidence of some of our best friends in the Government."⁷⁹

The President finally saw the folly of his strategy to have waited out mid-term elections when, just hours after results were announced, several Republicans who had lost their seat in Congress stopped by the White House and stated that the retention of McClellan had hurt them.

⁷⁶ Basler, p. 442.

⁷⁷ Sears, p. 335.

⁷⁸ Hensel, p. 94.

⁷⁹ Dennett, p. 51-2.

Congressman William Kelley of Pittsburgh suggested to the President that the smart thing would be to dismiss McClellan immediately, changing generals as frequently as necessary until the right one is found. Lincoln said to his visitors thoughtfully: "We shall see what we shall see."⁸⁰

Apparently the voice of the public finally broke Lincoln's grasp on the fear of alternatives - he realized anyone would be better than McClellan and acted as he should have many months before. General Order 182 dated November 5, 1862 stated: "By direction of the President, it is ordered that Major General McClellan be relieved from the command of the Army of the Potomac; and that Major General Burnside take the command of that Army."⁸¹ Burnside had pleaded his feeling that the decision was wrong when the order arrived on November 7th, but the messenger, Brigadier General Buckingham, arriving in the middle of a terrible snow storm,⁸² explained that McClellan's continuation in command was no longer an option; Burnside was told that if he did not accept the command, someone else, like General Hooker, would be given the opportunity. Burnside hated Hooker and, confronted with the prospect of working for him, reluctantly accepted the offer and accompanied the messenger to tell McClellan.⁸³

CONCLUSION

We can be sure of one thing: President Lincoln had more on his mind than "the good of the service" when he finally acted to relieve the commander of the Army of the Potomac. It is clear from this assessment that his response to Governor Kirkwood's probing statement was just one of many rationalizations that the President wrestled with during his 15-month relationship with General McClellan.

⁸⁰ Sandburg, p. 606-7.

⁸¹ Basler, p. 485.

⁸² Hensel, 28 Mar 1994 Lecture.

⁸³ Marvel, p. 159.

Though less clear, it also appears that President Lincoln could and should have acted sooner. His basic character as a leader; his misplaced respect and trust in McClellan's character and professionalism; his fears of a Confederate surprise attack and of revolt in the Army of the Potomac; his perceived shortage of "fighting generals" and of time to train a replacement; his inability to rely on his staff; and his deference to political considerations all made him repeatedly swallow hard and delay the decision that he knew had to be made. That procrastination, spurred frequently by a fixation on the process of leadership and management rather than the results he was hired to achieve, probably cost the nation thousands of lives and huge property damage. Thus, the sympathy that President Lincoln is accorded as a great, if not the greatest, wartime president in United States history appears misplaced. He should have acted quickly and decisively in relieving General McClellan at the first hint that the General did not share and support his vision for the conduct of the war. Easier said than done? Undoubtedly, but the many, more charitable interpretations of President Lincoln's place in history as a wartime leader glaringly overflow with the kinds of excuses we should not accept as a standard of conduct for people placed in positions of great trust and confidence.

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